

TRAINING OF DISTANCE EDUCATION TUTORS AT WAWASAN OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Tutor training for distance education is still necessary and through a face-to-face mode despite advances in digital delivery mechanism. A questionnaire records the before, during, and after training perceptions and feedback of tutors on the training conducted over 1 day. Tutors become aware of the uniqueness of the course materials and the Internet support through WawasanLearn. Questionnaire statements that are responded to positively are identified and there is evidence of increased confidence toward performing as a distance education tutor. Subsequent small-scale teleconferencing through use of Skype in tutor training was also initiated and this could be the precursor toward training tutors off site.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural country of 25 million people. Malays form the predominant ethnic group followed by Chinese, Indians, and local natives. Islam is the national religion and while Bahasa Malaysia is the official language, English is widely spoken. Geographically, Malaysia is as diverse as its culture. There are two parts to the country: 11 states in the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia and two states on the northern part of Borneo. Located south of Thailand and just north of Singapore at the equator, Malaysia is blessed with rich biodiversity and a young workforce. It has a strong manufacturing base in electronics, outsourcing, as well as being the top producer of

palm oil, timber, and—some years back—rubber. Malaysia's education system is well developed along the lines of the British system and is recognized as among the best in Asia.

Wawasan Open University (WOU) is the youngest distance education provider in Malaysia. It commenced its first semester on January 22, 2007, with two degree programs conducted through the School of Business and Administration, and the School of Science and Technology. Wawasan means "vision" in the Malay language and is the brainchild of a group of educators and philanthropists to provide a second chance for working adults who for a variety of reasons did not enroll into the traditional tertiary institutes when they were younger.

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WOU is the second distance education (DE) university after the Open University Malaysia (OUM). WOU is also the first non-profit private university and it began with a small number of foundation academics possessing excellent credentials in their respective fields. The chief executive officer of WOU is Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, the former president of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the recent conferee of the honorary fellow of COL in recognition of his major global contribution to the advancement of DE.

WOU's primary mission is to make access to higher education to all by removing barriers to higher education—barriers such as student's age, gender, and ethnic origin—and to provide quality education to students at work and in the English medium. WOU aims to provide post-secondary and continuing professional education by offering courses relevant and appropriate to a globalized environment. For a start, it is offering programs that lead to bachelor of business and bachelor of technology degrees. True to its mission of open entry and catering to those lacking the requisite entry qualifications, WOU simultaneously also launched a one-semester headstart program specifically designed for these students with emphases on enhancing students' literacy, numeracy, and study skills that will provide them a bridge to the first year of WOU's degree courses.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND NEED FOR TUTOR TRAINING

The first set of eight DE courses was developed through both adaptation and original course developments by the course coordinators of WOU with educational technology inputs as well as strict adherence to WOU course template, WOU style guide, and publishing protocols. The course materials normally consist of five units of printed self-instructional materials (SIM) that are written around a template guide with activities and interactions mainly driven through the use of icons. Based on experience with the WOU

template, this writer also contributed to the development of ODL template distributed by COL (Roffey, 2006). In addition there are also student guides, tutor guides with elaborations on the five tutorials convened for each course, the tutor marked assignments (TMAs), and specimen examination questions. As a supplementary course support, WOU also developed a learning portal for the courses through *WawasanLearn* that is specifically developed for registered students. This e-learning site supports tutor-student forums, student chats and enquiries, and also carries additional resources like PowerPoint slides, Word and Adobe files, as well as up-to-date announcements, events, and so forth.

Given the relative newness of the e-learning and the specific format of printed materials, the educational technology unit is tasked to conduct tutor training prior to presentation of the courses. As Rekkedal (1997) contended, tutors ought to receive adequate training in distance education methods, whether or not they have formal education in pedagogy or teaching experience from other settings, as well as to provide continuous support in their professional development in distance education methodology. No doubt there will be available tutors who have had experiences with distance education as tutors to OUM. However, based on the differing strategies and philosophies thereof, WOU has to conduct its own tutor training to match its instructional sequences as exemplified by the SIMs and *WawasanLearn*. Thus, it is critical that tutors assigned to manage the learning experience with the students have to be properly inducted to the details of the courses, course intents and activities, as well as the online learning support. The tutors identified were mostly college-based lecturers as well as experienced trainers, management professionals, and other academics. In order to employ them as tutors, WOU applied for teaching permits for successful tutors even though they are only employed on a part-time basis.

Based on the example given, it is important that tutors are aware of the developmental

2.1 The software development life cycle

Objectives

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

1. Identify the requirements of the software development life cycle (SDLC).
2. Describe the phases involved in the software development life cycle.

Introduction

Since the introduction of programming languages, programmers have been developing software applications to solve various problems. These software applications are getting more and more complicated and often also involve increasing numbers of programmers. As a result, a systematic approach has evolved from these programming experiences. This approach is known as the **software development life cycle (SDLC)**.

Why do we need the SDLC?

When you switch on your computer, it starts loading the operating system, which is probably a version of Microsoft Windows. You might then start a word processor or a spreadsheet application. How many software developers do you imagine were involved in building these kinds of software applications?

(4 paragraphs describing the SDLC components and functions)



Activity 2.1

Notice that SLDC is actually a very practical approach to our daily work and even our non-daily work. Suppose you intend to re-paint your family room of the house, use the SLDC to illustrate how you go about determining how much paint and time is required to do the job yourself.

Hint: A liter of paint can cover 12 square meters of wall with two coats of paints, and it takes approximately 30 minutes for every 10 square meters of painting

(This is followed by more contents, and activities)



Feedback/Answer to this Activity 2.1 is given at the end of the section

FIGURE 1
Examples of Course Materials Write-Up Driven by Icons

aspects of concept acquisition using “activities” in the course materials that culminate with a summative self-test at every stage of the unit sections. This mode of instructional presentation with insistence on formative acquisi-

tion strategies is thus a specific feature of WOU. Similarly WOU’s *WawasanLearn* is also slanted towards engaging the learner with more practices and resources and therefore tutors need to be trained for its use.

THE TUTOR TRAINING SESSIONS

Before tutors are trained they have to be identified and provisionally appointed. This was done through a number of mechanisms. First, the bulk of the interviews (53) was done based on face-to-face sessions at two main locations in Malaysia. This was made easier as they are scheduled at WOU's regional offices. Then, for 39 tutors serving other regional offices, it was decided to do the interview process through the video conferencing mode afforded by Skype. "Skype offers free global telephony and unlimited voice calls with its next-generation peer-to-peer free downloadable software" (Gaskin, 2005, para. 1). In addition, it can be hooked to a webcam for two-way video conferencing. For eight tutors who could not be accommodated by these two modes, telephone interviews were conducted. Identified tutors are then invited to attend training at two locations (i.e., Penang and Kuala Lumpur). Prior to attending the training session, the tutors had received a number of documents and these are the tutor recruitment pack and the tutor handbook (designed around a specific course). Tutors were encouraged to read these documents prior to the training.

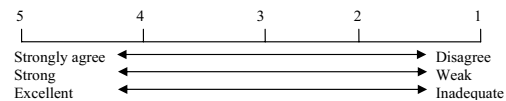
TUTOR TRAINING AND DATA COLLECTION

A 1-day training session for tutors was conducted in Penang and Kuala Lumpur for a total of 117 tutors identified by the schools on November 5 and 12, 2006. The morning session centred on tutoring, *WawasanLearn*, and library access, and the afternoon session was mostly on academic matters.

Before the session, registering tutors were issued the tutor training questionnaire and were informed to fill in the questionnaire on a before, during, and after training basis. The respondents to the questionnaire are not required to identify themselves.

The questionnaire consists of statements (e.g., "The interview method I have had should

be used for subsequent occasions") to be responded on a Likert-like scale of 5 to 1 representing degree of perceptions/viewpoints/agreement vis-à-vis the statement.



The sessions, conducted in English and used a set of PowerPoint slides that covered a number of areas such as "Method of Tutoring at WOU," "Do's and Don'ts of Tutoring," "*WawasanLearn*," and so forth. There were adequate question-and-answer slots so that all participants could voice their view and get further insights into specifics of the tutoring process as well as the course materials they had a looked over.

The tutors were asked to fill in the questionnaire as the course progressed. The questionnaire was easily filled in by circling the score accorded to each statement on a 5-point scale. These questionnaires were recovered from the tutors as they left the venue for refreshments and individual sessions with the attending course coordinators.

The data collected were entered into an Excel file and ported to statistical analysis software. Using the score of 4 or 5 as the satisfaction level of 80% and above, the results of the analyses are reported here.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSES

Experiences With Method of Interview

The tutors were asked their experience with the interview and the mechanism in which the interview was conducted. Using only scores of 5 and 4 as a measure of "very positive" and "positive," and reversing the scores for negatively worded statements, the results of the interview structure and processes were considered positively, and statements that accrued >80% are presented in Table 1.

The interview methods employed are thus well received, and the modes that involve

TABLE 1
Reported Experience with Mode of Interview

1. Information provided was clear and adequate	91.9
2. Flow of question and answer session was consistent	84.8
3. Interviewee opportunities to raise question was adequate	87.5
4. Time arrangement for the interview was flexible	85.8
5. Time allocated for interviews was sufficient	92.9
6. Venue/location arrangement for the interview was appropriate	88.4
7. I feel comfortable with the method of interview	87.5

TABLE 2
Ability of Tutoring in DE Environment

1. I am confident in face-to-face tutoring	89.2
2. I am experienced in giving comments and feedback to students in assignment marking so that the students know how to improve their knowledge and skill	84.9

TABLE 3
Tutor Recruitment Pack—Statements With Score >80.0

1. It is readable	95.5
2. It is informative	92.8
3. It is useful and relevant	92.9
4. Quality of content is high	82.1

Skype and telephone can continue to be used if a slightly better protocol of interactions is employed to avoid delays and uncertainties about the questions asked.

Prior Knowledge of ODL Tutoring

Table 2 presents the statements scoring >80% when tutors were asked about their perception of their abilities to be a tutor for ODL students.

Generally, the tutors have confidence about their abilities, and the study now will have to ascertain if these abilities could be improved as a result of the training provided. (See section titled “Is There a Change in Perception

About Skills in Tutoring?” in later aspects of analyses.) The other statements dealt with abilities in telephone tutoring, online facilitation, and general student counseling, and these fall below the 80% level of confidence.

Tutor Recruitment Pack and Tutor Handbook

Scores recorded for impressions of the tutors on the tutor recruitment pack and the tutor handbook are all positive, with means >4. For both publications, when the statement says “It is too lengthy,” the means are at 3.1 and 3.22, meaning that the responses to lengthiness are just neutral. See Tables 3 and 4.

TABLE 4
Tutor Handbook—Statements With Score >80.0

1. It is readable	93.8
2. It is informative	93.7
3. It is useful and relevant	94.6
4. It is sufficient in term of the coverage/depth of the content	89.3
5. Quality of content is high	90.2

TABLE 5
Being a Tutor in WOU—Statements With Score >80.0

1. Do's and don'ts for tutors	91.1
2. Counseling your students	91.1
3. Telephone tutoring	91.1
4. Preparing for tutorial	88.4

TABLE 6
Assessment, Assignments, Administrative Issues Related to
Tutoring in WOU—Statements with Score >80.0

1. TMAs and grading	82.2
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Training Session Quality of Content in Sessions

The session that deals with “tutoring” lasted an hour. The contents of the session deal with the pedagogy, mode of tutoring, schedule, and responsibilities of a DE tutor. Examples of good and bad tutoring are thrown in liberally, accompanied with video clips. Tutors generally responded favorably to the examples and proffered quite a few insights into the examples used and these are mostly in consonance with the intended aims. See Tables 5 and 6.

It is thus clear that for administrative issues about tutoring, there is more that could be done, or that some of these should be discussed and operationalized during actual tutoring sessions as these involve administrative procedural efforts that could best be developed on site.

Overall Training Program

The reflections about the training sessions were collected based on responses to a set of

statements about the relevance and usefulness of the training. It is evident that of the eight statements employed to measure satisfaction with the training, seven statements scored >80%. See Table 7.

Self-Assessment After Training

The last section of the questionnaire is about the perceptions tutors reported on the skills they were supposed to possess to conduct ODL tutorials, and the reported skills and capabilities are reflected in the six statements that are all over 80%. See Table 8.

Is There a Change in Perception About Skills in Tutoring?

Statements on “prior knowledge of skills” and “after training knowledge of skills” were compared. Two statements with a mean score of <4.0 illustrated significant increase in ability reported. See Table 9.

TABLE 7
Suitability and General Positive Perception about the Training

1. Relevancy of the training program	96.4
2. Usefulness of the training program	92.9
3. Flow/sequencing of the presentations	87.5
4. Level of discussions in the training	86.6
5. Suitability of the tutor training program in terms of duration (1 day)	89.3
6. Administration of the training	88.4
7. Overall training	92.8

TABLE 8
Reported Increment in Scores of Statements on Tutoring

1. Tutoring skills face to face	95.5
2. Telephone tutoring	86.6
3. Use of learning management system	90.2
4. Online facilitating	88.4
5. Assignment marking and giving comments	89.3
6. Counseling skills	80.4

TABLE 9
Confidence and Capability in Telephone Tutoring and Counseling

	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>
1. I am confident in telephone tutoring	3.87	4.29
2. I am experienced in counseling the ODL students in term of motivating the students in balancing their workloads, family and study or counseling them in time management skill	3.96	4.20

There is thus an improvement on the tutor-related skills for these two aspects and also the remaining statements also illustrate an increase in mean score from the original means at the lower 4s with increments of .25 points or more. These responses are only perceptions of the tutors and it may not be true in actual situations but, for most, the discussions on the video clips on counseling and telephone tutoring seems to be rather animated and this may be an indicator of what tutors may do in the actual situation.

DISCUSSION

Because WOU is a young distance education university, many distance education practitio-

ners would have expected it to move straight into the digital environment and teach using primarily online modes. After the dot-com bubble of 1995-2001 and experiences with technology, the online mode would seem the most feasible. But is it? We still see distance education institutions distributing their learning materials primarily through the print mode and for Malaysia the online infrastructure is not something to shout about yet. A look at the big distance education providers will also attest to similar problems with online services, and that is why Indian distance education institutions still depend on both print and satellite broadcast through EDUSAT (a satellite

devoted exclusively to distance learning). In fact, this is the more cost efficient way for a big nation. Similarly, only pockets of Malaysian urban centres have reliable and high-speed Internet, and the method WOU selected is still basically print-based with Internet support through *WawasanLearn*. There will be in time to shift towards delivery of course materials through the Internet, but this will not be the sole mechanism as students still prefer to hold onto something tangible—the printed materials. Thus, WOU has not embarked on online training of its tutors for the same reasons.

All tutors are gainfully employed in their profession as teachers, academics, and senior management positions in industry. As WOU tutors are employed on an hourly basis, and so may not have allegiance to the institution except for the hours they are in service. To encourage tutors to be partners on a long-term basis, WOU had ameliorated the allegiance factor through incentives like subsidizing the tutor's access expenses to the Internet, and part payment of telephone bills for tutor-initiated calls. This way, WOU hopes the tutors will monitor student interactions with *WawasanLearn*, and also to participate in online forums when not in their scheduled tutorial sessions. Tutors are allowed access to *WawasanLearn* while in training as well as for a fixed period after that.

The feedback thus received from the trained tutors shows a marked improvement in perception and expected skills of a tutor. The one-day training is deemed adequate and we can only attest to this once the session is on and end-of-semester evaluations are done. The taste, as they say, is in the pudding! Also, informal chats with distance education practitioners have indicated that there may be further training required, especially those of a just-in-time nature when specific skills are required for performance. WOU may consider subsequent delivery of training through Skype and with training materials posted on *WawasanLearn* or be available in electronic media. Just before

the start of the new semester, WOU became aware of the shortage of tutors for specific courses at specific locations. This was to be expected, as all estimates and projection on student enrollment and course enrollments will always be a very rough educated guess. Thus four more tutors were trained through the Skype mechanism and these tutors have not reported any disenfranchisement with the system.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the training sessions have been successful in bringing about a more positive perception and comprehension on the roles and duties of tutors as well as the comprehension of the academic content and delivery mode requirements for tutor performance. Tutorial conduct will be monitored and regular checks be made by the course coordinators and regional officers on site. WOU will strive to continuously raise the standard of course delivery and tutor support of students through in-house evaluations and training. There will be continuous assessment of the system thus developed and to make learning at WOU worthwhile.

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